



Houston Case Study for Parks: Return & Restore

Like most park and recreation agencies throughout the United States the Houston Park and Recreation Department has had its share of budget cuts in the last year. These cuts impacted the Department's Metropolitan Multi-Service Center (MMSC) that houses the city's adaptive recreation division.

The MMSC was acquired in 2006 in a transfer from the Houston Health Department to the Park and Recreation Department. The Center provides an adaptive fitness gym, a full court gym that hosts Paralympic Sports Club Houston, an indoor heated pool with Certified Recreational Specialist who oversees the adaptive aquatics program, and outdoor recreational opportunities that includes a playground without limits, a beep baseball field, and a community garden that is accessible to all. While the Center is an amazing facility for those people in Houston with disabilities, including wounded warriors, Paralympic athletes, the elderly, and children, the budget cuts have made managing the Center on a day-to-day basis more difficult.

"It is an on-going battle as we struggle to hire new staff and secure contract staff members. After being hit hard with citywide layoffs in July 2011 we had to form a plan of action," says Chuck French, Administrative Manager for the Adaptive Recreation Division. That plan included keeping the facility open the same amount of hours and continuing on-going programming and activities, potentially serve more people with less budget and staff, and to meet already established internal goals of providing more programs.

According to French remaining staff had to take on new responsibilities. "Our only recreation specialist now spends half his day with fitness programming/monitoring and the other half as a lifeguard. Between rotations lifeguards now cover front desk duties. Our administration staff member now covers front desk duties and coordinates the volunteer program. It was very important that we did not interrupt current facility hours and on-going activities." They also put out a request for volunteer assistance. Many of the current adaptive recreation participants came forward to volunteer their time and energy.

French also got creative in forming partnerships that ultimately expanded participation in programming. "Instead of traveling to rehab hospitals or other clinics to recruit potential participants, I invited them to us. I reached out to several Houston area support groups/clubs ranging from low vision clubs to spinal cord injury groups. We offered to host their next group meeting. Through word of mouth, general referrals we would typically see 5-10 new participants in a normal week but by hosting these support groups we are now seeing 10-20 new participants each week.

Lessons learned:

- Be creative with staffing when budgets are limited
- Ask your clients to volunteer
- Develop partnerships including hosting meetings at your park and recreation agency facilities